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## **Bosnia: Words Translated Into Genocide**

Speech, Power, Violence: Balkans experiences of 1990s

Reporting on the release of the *Preventing Genocide: A Blueprint for U.S. Policymakers* report – published by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, The American Academy of Diplomacy, and the Endowment of the United States Institute of Peace – the leading Belgrade daily *Politika* titled its Jan. 8, 2009 article, “Madeleine Albright Proposes Obama New Wars.” A fact that a leading newspaper in Serbia takes a hostile position towards an initiative such as genocide prevention, reflects a critical shortfall in all peacebuilding efforts following the wars of the 1990s in the Balkans: the lack of common understanding of the causes and consequences of the conflicts, which then creates conditions for nationalistic interpretation of the past; propagandistic presentation of history and incitement to hatred and violence, culminating in genocide.

In this case, the newspaper reduces the whole book of recommendations, covering a range of genocide prevention measures and mechanisms – the role of leadership, early warning, early prevention, preventive diplomacy – to just one, and last, measure: military intervention. The hostility towards that stems from a propagandistic interpretation of the American-led NATO intervention against Serbia in 1999. Almost a decade after the conflict, the narrative of what happened is limited to a simple story: “NATO aggression.” Strictly censored Belgrade media at the time of intervention did not share with the public the reasoning behind the international intervention, namely – the Milosevic government’s mistreatment of the Kosovo Albanian population culminating in mass “ethnic cleansing” with hundreds of thousands of Albanians fleeing their homes. It was only then – in the early spring of 1999 – that NATO intervened. Even a decade later, long after Milosevic was arrested and extradited to the International War Crimes Tribunal in the Hague – where he died before the conclusion of his trial – the two successive democratically elected governments in Serbia have not done enough to challenge the nationalistic narrative of Serbia’s responsibility for the Balkans wars of the 1990s. The “NATO-bombed-us” story, with no documented account of – why, fuels anti-Western sentiments, resulting in violence in Belgrade against international recognition of Kosovo’s independence, including the setting on fire of the U.S. Embassy in the Serbian capital on Feb. 21, 2008. The prime responsibility of the Milosevic regime has been validated before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Hague, which sentenced some of the top civilian and

military members of the Serbian government for their participation in a “joint criminal enterprise (JCE),” in the Kosovo campaign against Albanian civilians:

Yugoslav Deputy Prime Minister, Nikola Šainović; Yugoslav Army General Nebojša Pavković and Serbian police General, Sreten Lukić were found to have made a “significant contribution” to the execution of the JCE, and were sentenced to 22 years’ imprisonment each for crimes against humanity and war crimes; while the Yugoslav Army Chief of Staff, Dragoljub Ojdanić and General Vladimir Lazarević were both found guilty of aiding and abetting the deportation and forcible transfer of ethnic Albanians from Kosovo, each receiving 15 years’ imprisonment.<sup>i</sup>

This episode – with a leading Belgrade daily misrepresenting the *Preventing Genocide* report – is just the most recent example of the broader failure, and of the critical need, to acknowledge the past in order to create conditions for reconciliation and peaceful future throughout the region.

### **Chip Replacement: From “Brotherhood and Unity” to “Ancient Enemies”**

It was exactly the propagandistic interpretation of the region’s past that made it possible for the nationalistic leaders of the 1990s to turn once peaceful Balkans neighbors into “ancient enemies.” Serbia’s Milosevic was the first to use the party-controlled media to stir ethnic tensions, with media reviving old fears and grievances, projecting the forgotten historic conflicts into the present-day debates, portraying nowadays Croats as [the WWII Nazi-supported] “Ustasha;” Bosnian Muslims as “Turks” [who occupied Serbia in the fifteenth century]; and increasingly using the derogatory term “Shiptar” for Kosovo Albanians. Croatia’s Tudjman mirrored Milosevic’s propaganda in media under his control: Historian himself, he revived some of the WWII symbols and ethnic stereotypes reminiscent of the Ustasha regime, reinforcing Milosevic propagandists’ line that Croatia’s proposed independence represents a threat, justifying calls for the Croatian Serbs’ rebellion against their country.

This propagandistic manipulation of the past was made possible to a large extent because of the failure to fully acknowledge the WWII atrocities. In the absence of a clear historic account of the true nature and magnitude of the atrocities committed by Croatia’s Ustasha regime, there was a cruel propagandistic “game with numbers” in presentations on what went on in Jasenovac, a notorious concentration camp in Croatia during WWII:

- Tudjman and Croat nationalist historians and media were trying to rewrite the history by minimizing the number of those that perished in Jasenovac, speaking of “just around 20,000 killed” and even initiating a reburial of the bones of “all those killed in the WWII,” which would “unite in death” innocent victims of the Nazi persecution and Croatian fascists responsible for their slaughter [the initiative encountered public opposition and was defeated in Croatia with the new President Stipe Mesic, elected in 2000, making a few high-profile public statements acknowledging Ustasha crimes and issuing public apologies];

- Serb nationalist historians displayed the other side of disrespect of the Jasenovac victims – by inflating their numbers for propagandistic purposes – as if the true story of mass extermination of the Serbs, Jews, Gypsies and the ideologically “undesirable” from other ethnic groups in Jasenovac wasn’t historically repugnant enough.

Introduction of the old ethnic animosities and stereotypes in the post-Tito Yugoslavia of the late 1980s represented a 180-degree turnaround for the Yugoslav media: With a credibility earned in fighting the Nazi occupation in WWII, Tito’s communists in the decades of his undisputed rule, 1945-1980, promoted the idea of “brotherhood and unity” among Yugoslavia’s diverse ethnic groups. With the post-Tito emergence of nationalist politicians promoting their own ethnic group’s “interests” over the “others” – thus undermining the constitutionally guaranteed equal representation of the six republics and two autonomous provinces in federal institutions – practically the same top media editors who for decades propagated “brotherhood and unity” suddenly adopted a new propagandistic line portraying neighbors as enemies to the point of inciting and justifying violence against “them”.

The change from the “brotherhood-unity” to the “ancient enemies” mode resembled a “chip replacement” operation: being used to follow the party line for decades, the party-appointed editors easily – and even enthusiastically – adopted and promoted the new line, even though it was in complete contrast to the previous one. In Serbia’s case, it was enough for Milosevic to have undisputed loyalty of just four top media executives – namely: the head of the national Radio and TV company; the head of the *Politika* publishing house, and the editors of the two largest circulation tabloids [*Vecernje novosti* and *Politika ekspres*] - to have complete control over 90 percent of the “news” served to the Serbian public. With the military takeover of the radio and TV transmitters in the Serb-controlled areas of Bosnia Herzegovina, the same propagandistic line – with even more direct incitement to ethnic violence – was promoted through Bosnian Serb media.

The most notorious in promoting hate speech and celebrating “ethnic cleansing” in the 1990s was the Serb TV headquartered in Pale – a mountain village less than 10 miles from Sarajevo – that also housed the self-styled Bosnian Serb government led by Radovan Karadzic. Pale TV Journal, anchored by some of the former Sarajevo Radio and TV journalists such as Risto Djogo, Ilija Guzina, Dragan Bozanic, and others, was full of praise for the Serb “liberating forces” that took over vast areas of Bosnia, from towns along the Drina River to Bosanska Krajina and Eastern Bosnia, in a campaign of terror that saw some of the worst atrocities in Europe since World War II. What was soon to be known in Western media as “ethnic cleansing,” with concentration camps, mass executions, rape, looting, and the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of people from their homes, was celebrated on Serb TV as “liberation.”

Pale TV editor Risto Djogo was most memorable for his primitive hatred of the Bosnian Muslims. People who watched his Journal day in and day out remember him sporting a long

knife and saying, “And this is what we have for our former neighbors *Balije* [derogatory term for Muslims].” He would keep his bare feet in a pan of water, ridiculing a Muslim ritual before prayer. He accompanied a news report on a meeting in Geneva attended by a member of the Bosnian Presidency, Tatjana Ljuic-Mijatovic, with a footage from a pornographic movie suggesting the immorality of her remaining, as a Serb, loyal to Bosnia. On the occasion of the massacre of civilians in the Sarajevo marketplace in February 1994, he finished his report by laying on the studio floor beneath the editorial desk, posing as a fake victim of shelling and exhibiting a traditional Serb three-finger salute as a symbol of “Serb victory.” Miljenko Jergovic, a Bosnian writer working for the Croatian weekly *Feral Tribune*, remembering Pale TV said in an interview: “Djogo was definitely the most evil media figure of that war. He was the only one who tried to make Serbs believe that shedding other people’s blood could be a subject of fun, something even joyous. No one else was doing that. He disregarded death, projecting it as something positive.” Years after the war, *Oslobodjenje* columnist Gojko Beric remained puzzled as to why Sarajevans—while there was still electricity in the besieged city—regularly watched the Pale TV Journal, which was broadcast immediately after the Bosnian TV news at 8 p.m. “People were waiting for Djogo’s evening Journal, like in some masochistic ritual, expecting to see how low it could get. In the beginning, there was still some disbelief that the war—with the killing of people in their homes, in the streets and parks, with Djogo and all the evil he represented—would last long. But later it became almost a need to see what kind of people were behind all that terror. I think that Djogo’s primitive hatred produced an unintended reaction among the Sarajevans—defiance and superiority against the evil—and I believe that, in the end, it contributed to the survival of the city,” Beric said.

When Djogo’s body was found in the water at a dam near Zvornik on Sept. 13, 1994—following his “disappearance” in that town most probably at the hands of some of his “Serb heroes”—Jergovic wrote an essay listing some of his most memorable “Satanic jokes.” In one of them, in the winter of 1992–93, when Sarajevans were literally freezing and starving, he said that they were the luckiest people in the world: while everyone else plays Lotto and gets nothing, they all have seven accurate “hits”—on their homes. Nor did he hesitate to make racist comments. Ridiculing horrifying stories of the mass rape of Bosnian women in Serb-held detention centers, he said, “Those converted Turk women claim that we are raping them and yet one of them just gave birth to a black baby in a refugee center.” Telling that racist “joke,” Djogo appeared with a black mask over his face. In his essay Jergovic wrote: “He was the first one who openly told Croats and Muslims, with a smile on his face, that Chetniks don’t aim to subjugate them but to exterminate them.”

Pale TV specialized in inventing “terror against Serbs” in Muslim-held Sarajevo. On one occasion, they said that Serb children were being fed to the lions in the Sarajevo Zoo. On another occasion, they reported that “in last night’s terror against prominent Serbs in Sarajevo,” former soccer star and director of the Sarajevo Football Club Svetozar Vujovic had been killed. Vujovic

appeared in public the next day. When he died of terminal illness a couple of months later, hundreds of Sarajevans of all ethnic backgrounds congregated at the Holiday Inn hotel to pay their last respects to their fellow citizen. Pale TV was routinely quicker than Karadzic's headquarters to deny any responsibility of the Serb forces shelling the city. Ever since the bread-line massacre in Vase Miskina Street on May 27, 1992, claiming the lives of more than twenty Sarajevans and maiming dozens, Djogo and his staff would automatically claim that it was "Muslims killing their own people in order to provoke international intervention."

As the terror against Bosnia continued, with Bosnian Muslims as the prime target of first the Milosevic's "Greater Serbia" and then Tudjman's "Greater Croatia" project, Muslims developed their own brand of nationalism in media, starting with *Ljiljan*; "*Zmaj od Bosne*" (Dragon of Bosnia) and *Bosniak* magazines, all promoting hatred towards Serbs and Croats: There were articles arguing that "Every Muslim should have his own Serb to kill" and celebrating the – untrue – story that "In [town of] Ugljevik there are 500 Serb orphans;" Adnan Jahic, who would later become the official spokesman for the leading Muslim party SDA, wrote an article laying the ground for a strictly Islamic state based on "authentic Islamic values" - in such a state, he wrote, "Muslim ideology will dominate the entire state-political system, from the state and national symbols, through national policy to education, social, and economic institutions and, of course, family as the nucleus of the whole state;" A suspicion of Serb neighbors became a regular feature of the extremist Muslim media: It was then used as grounds for apartment searches and other kinds of intimidation, including the takeover of Serbs' "abandoned" apartments and businesses by well-connected rogue elements of the Bosniak armed forces; Even the most symbolic and most intimate expression of the culture of tolerance, the so-called "mixed marriages" so common in Bosnian cities, became a target of ultranationalist attacks.

In the case of former Yugoslavia, the sequencing of the incitement to kill included a complete cycle of media manipulation:

- undisputed national leader (Milosevic in Serbia, Tudjman in Croatia);
- a well defined "vital national interest" in a country in dissolution with a complete disregard for interests of "others;"
- ethnic stereotyping of "others" as enemies with the media justification for some sort of "preventive genocide:" "if we don't kill them, they will kill us;"
- party appointed media editors willing to promote the line of the day;
- lack of the non-nationalistic media alternative, with all opposing voices silenced or marginalized and labeled "traitors" and "foreign mercenaries" if daring to challenge the official line;

- complete nationalist control over the airwaves and the media market;
- reporters publicly boosting their patriotic credentials by admitting they are “proud to lie for the homeland” to the point of fabrication of the stories aimed at inciting violence against “others” [*Politika* report of the “Ustasha killing of 41 Serb children in Vukovar;” Bosnian Serb TV report on “Serb children being fed to the lions in Sarajevo ZOO;” Croatian daily *Vjesnik* report of “35 Croats hanged [by Bosnian Muslims] in front of the Catholic church in Zenica;” Belgrade daily *Vecernje Novosti* presenting a 115-year-old painting, exhibited in the Belgrade National Museum, claiming that it was a photograph of a Serb orphan boy whose parents had been killed by Bosnian Muslims – all completely fabricated, aimed at instilling fear and hatred of “others” and resulting in actual “revenge” against innocent civilians of other ethnic groups for those alleged crimes.]<sup>ii</sup>

The enabling factors in the Balkans conflicts included: the authoritarian regime with the undisputed nationalist leader; its unchallenged control over all relevant media; absence of the opposition or functioning civil society; lack of alternative media [in the early 1990s there was no Internet; no independent media; no international broadcast available]. There is a critical point to be made here: In discussing the Balkans media role in promoting ethnic hatred and violence, escalating in genocide, this author is not arguing primarily for some sort of “media control,” “policing” or “prosecuting” media. The missing element is exactly the opposite: more, and not less, freedom to report and debate national issues; the ability to challenge and oppose the “official line;” with media giving voice to those representing the other side of the story, including the internal opposition.

While there was no prosecution of the Balkans media – or individual journalists - for their role in inciting war crimes, their vital contribution to creating the conditions and justification for “ethnic cleansing” has been well established:

- Contrary to the simplistic explanation that Milosevic, after becoming Serbia’s President through a Party coup in 1987, first took control of the media, the top media executives actively participated in bringing him to power, and helped promote him into the undisputed Serb leader [the top manager of national TV actively participated in staging Milosevic’s appearance before Kosovo Serbs in April 1987 playing over and over again his promise to the “threatened Serb people” that “No one is allowed to beat you anymore!” which ultimately made him an undisputed representative of all Serbs];
- Media – first in Milosevic’s Serbia, then in Tudjman’s Croatia – made it a patriotic duty to promote the governing party line, completely silencing the opposition, labeling anyone who would question the authority as “traitors” and “foreign mercenaries,” with some critics of the Milosevic regime being murdered following such criticism in Serbian media (notably – a few days after the state TV and daily *Politika Ekspres* accused publisher

Slavko Curuvija of “supporting NATO bombing of Serbia,” which by the way wasn’t true, Curuvija was killed execution-style in an ambush at his apartment building in April 1999: ten years later, his executioners have not been brought to justice);

- Media was instrumental in setting the stage for monstrosities of the 1990s. Croatian writer Dubravka Ugresic describes how the “infernal media campaign” in Serbia and Croatia helped prepare both entities for war: “In Serbian newspapers articles began to appear about the Ustasha camps during the Second World War (and no one could deny their truthfulness, because they existed and Serbs, Gypsies, Jews, and Croats perished there). More and more pictures of the camps began appearing on Serbian television. Croats began increasingly to be called criminals, ‘Ustashas.’ Serbian newspapers were full of horrifying stories on ‘necklaces of Serbian children's fingers,’ worn by the Croat ‘Ustashas,’ of the ‘genocide’ that the Croats were again preparing to carry out against innocent Serbs. The Serbian media propaganda, orchestrated by Serbian authorities, finally achieved what it had sought: a reaction in the Croatian media. And when the Croatian media, also filled with tales of ‘necklaces of Croatian children’s fingers’ worn round the necks of Serbian ‘cut-throats,’ the preparations were laid for war.”<sup>iii</sup>
- Media provided justification for war-time atrocities, celebrating “ethnic cleansing” as “liberation,” and promoting some of the most notorious war criminals into national heroes: paramilitary commander Zeljko Raznatovic-Arkan, whose forces displayed special brutality in the early stages of “ethnic cleansing” and made a fortune looting towns in Croatia and Bosnia, was regularly celebrated in the Serbian media; Bosnian Serb political and military leaders, Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, enjoyed the same status which explains their vast network of support and the fact that the latter has not been arrested more than 13 years after the war.

The “International community” could have been more helpful in mediating conflict resolution by holding the key nationalist politicians directly responsible for the media environment they created and controlled, including conditioning their acceptance as partners in a peace process on their treatment of the media. It is indicative, in the absence of this concern in a peace process, that – even though it was widely established that media manipulation played a critical role in the Balkans’ wars – there was no mention of the media in the whole Dayton Peace Agreement ending the Bosnian war, except in an annex regarding the first post-war elections. This omission, not addressing a proper media role in the post-conflict Balkans, had an extremely negative effect on the peace process: With the promotion of the principal Balkans arsonists – Milosevic and Tudjman - into “firefighters,” the media in postwar Serbia and Croatia, as well as in Bosnia Herzegovina, remained under nationalists’ control, continuing to obstruct the acknowledgment of the past and delaying the region’s progress towards Euro-Atlantic integrations.

## How Could International Media Help

In discussing the role of the media in the Balkans war and peace, some media experts and practitioners argue that – in the face of genocidal crimes – the media risk falling into a trap of advocacy: trying to influence their governments’ response to the unfolding tragedy. In two essays I have argued that there are certain things in this world – and genocide is high on that list – in which media should not be neutral: they can be perfectly objective without being neutral between the perpetrators and victims of war crimes.<sup>iv</sup> The reporting of brave individuals in American and British media, such as Roy Gutman (then with *Newsday*), John Burns (*The New York Times*), late Peter Jennings (ABC documentaries), Christian Amanpour (CNN), David Rhode (then *Christian Science Monitor*), Elizabeth Neuffer (*Boston Globe*), Ed Vulliamy and Maggie O’Kane (*Guardian*), to mention just a few, provides examples of objective, facts-based stories that made a positive difference. Their reporting was based on facts, yet the stories they told were instrumental in moving governments into action in the face of genocidal atrocities in the last decade of the “never again” century.

Gutman and Vulliamy, with their first-hand reports about the existence of concentration camps in Bosnia, helped save thousands of lives. Once their stories and pictures of starving inmates reached the public, the Red Cross entered those areas, put together lists of camps and prisoners, and brought an end to torture and execution.

The search for “neutrality at any cost” – to the point of looking for balance in reporting on a war where there is no balance on the ground – distorts reality. A case in point was the massacre in Srebrenica. In July 1995, Serbian forces under the command of general Ratko Mladic took over that supposedly “safe zone,” and in a matter of days killed almost the entire male population of the town, some 8,000 people. Some television networks – practicing that art of perfect neutrality, which has value in debates in civil societies but not in the case of massive slaughter of innocent civilians - brought to their studios a “representative of the other side,” a young lady speaking for those responsible for slaughter. She shrugged off the story of the massacre with a favorite line of the ultranationalist propaganda, “This is only the (Bosnian) Muslim government trying to blame Serbs, nothing else.” It is in situations such as this one that neutrality works against objectivity.

On a personal level, I can’t think about the question of journalists testifying about war crimes without thinking about my colleague Kjasif Smajlovic. He was a small-town (Zvornik) correspondent for my paper – the Sarajevo daily, *Oslobodjenje*. He was the first of 51 journalists killed in three and a half years of war in Bosnia. He died because his town was on the Bosnian bank of the Drina river separating Serbia from Bosnia, and his was the first town to be “ethnically cleansed” to connect Serbia proper with the Serb-inhabited territories in Bosnian and Croatia as part of the grand plan of creating “Greater Serbia.” Kjasif knew he faced a death threat: Serbian artillery was pounding his town for a few days in order to discourage any defense. This brave man put his family on one of the trucks full of refugees escaping the imminent fall of Zvornik while he continued to report. In his last call to our regional office, announcing his daily work plan, he said, “If I manage, I will report on the attack on Zvornik, and then you won’t hear from me again.” He did not manage. Serbian paramilitary fighters found him in his correspondent’s office behind his old-fashioned typewriter, writing his last report. They tortured



and killed him. He was buried in a mass grave along with about 100 of his fellow citizens killed that day, marked only by a number tied to his toe.

By literally dying to tell the story of the terror against his town, Smajlovic set bar of professional ethics high for the rest of his colleagues. When the terror spread throughout Bosnia and very soon first bullets hit my newspaper building in Sarajevo – in what would become a daily routine of machine-gun, sniper and artillery fire that ultimately reduced our ten-floor twin towers into rubble and forced us to move the newsroom into the underground atomic bomb shelter – Smajlovic’s example was high among the motives to continue publishing under the life-threatening conditions. In declaring that “as long as Sarajevo exists, this paper will come out every day,”<sup>v</sup> I listed another three reasons for that:

- One was the paper’s tradition – *Oslobodjenje* (Liberation) started as an anti-Nazi paper during the World War II in Bosnian mountains, and could not keep silent in face of terror;
- Second – there was a professional responsibility: if dozens of foreign journalists could come to report on Bosnian war, how could we, with our families and country under fire, stop doing what we were trained to do;
- And, finally – and most importantly – the responsibility towards our readers: just in pre-war time *Oslobodjenje* gained new respect and recognition, being named the 1989 Newspaper of the Year in Yugoslavia, and we could not betray our readers’ trust at the most critical time of their lives.

### **Way Forward Starts With Acknowledging the Past**

I have utmost respect for Serbian journalists who went to the Hague Tribunal to testify against the man accused of presiding over a “joint criminal enterprise,” long-time Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic. Dejan Anastasijevic, who reports for Belgrade’s *Vreme*, was one of those who were not afraid to give televised testimony about the war crimes they reported. He wrote about his experience for *Time*, a magazine to which he also contributes reporting. “It may have been the most important thing I will ever do,” Anastasijevic wrote. “After my testimony was over I felt as if a great burden had been lifted. For me, the Balkan wars were finally over. Now I could go home.”

Back to my opening story – regarding the importance of acknowledging the past in order to facilitate reconciliation – I believe that the long-term peaceful coexistence in the Balkans requires:

- Full acknowledgment of the abuses of the past;
- Prosecution of those responsible for war-time atrocities;
- Acknowledgment – by name – and unconditional respect for all innocent victims on all sides;

- and, development and promotion of a common, documents-based, narrative of the regional history in order to deny ultranationalists another opportunity to manipulate the past for new tensions and conflicts.

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<sup>i</sup> ICTY delivers sentences for 'Kosovo Six,' The Hague Justice Portal

<sup>ii</sup> All cited examples could be found in: Kemal Kurspahic, *Prime Time Crime: Balkan Media in War and Peace* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2003)

<sup>iii</sup> Dubravka Ugresic, *The Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University, 1998,)

<sup>iv</sup> Kemal, Kurspahic, "Neutrality vs. Objectivity in Bosnia," Columbia University's Media Studies Journal, vol. 9, no. 4 (Fall 1995): 91-98. and Kemal Kurspahic, "Objectivity Without Neutrality: A Bosnian journalist reflects on the value of testifying about the crimes of genocide," Nieman Reports – Harvard University, Spring 2003 Issue)

<sup>v</sup> John F. Burns, "Sarajevo Paper Defies War by Staying in Print," The New York Times, Oct. 7, 1992